

European wine weekends for 2021: four great short breaks planned

A romantic escape, a weekend away with friends... Fiona Sims provides some much-needed inspiration for 2021 after the cancellation of so many travel plans last year, picking four vibrant European destinations that wine lovers will love



Château de Saumur is the archetypal turreted Loire château, high on the banks of the Loire. Credit: David-Emmanuel Cohen

A long weekend spent in a wine region is about so much more than discovering a few new wines. You really get a sense of the place, its people and their traditions. But don't think you can just hop on a plane and rock up to the wineries you've earmarked for a visit unannounced (if you want to taste the good stuff, at least). Indeed, many of the world's most exciting wines are made in small, family-run wineries that just don't have the budget to allow for tour guides and fancy tasting rooms. It's not that they don't want to see you – they do, they just need a little notice.

And with stomachs rumbling after a morning tasting, forget rolling into that perfect little eatery for lunch, as it's likely to be rammed with locals and other smug wine tourists who have booked well ahead. Yup, you guessed it, some organisation is required – nothing intense, more a flurry of emails.

After you've booked your winery appointments, decide how you want to get around. Driving yourself is the most flexible – just be mindful of alcohol intake. But if you want to remove that worry, then there are companies that offer all-inclusive, guided wine tours all over the world, including in our four highlighted regions in the following pages. Or, if you want more freedom, then hotels will arrange taxis for you (some wineries, too). Or mix it up: drive one day and taxi the next.

Mix up appointments with tours and tastings, too, as it allows for a more flexible, immersive experience. Save the full-on tours for those wineries with exceptional grounds, and opt for tastings in the more modest establishments.

Mug up on the wine region's USPs. Armed with a few nuggets of info, such as key grape varieties and some background history of the region and its producers, each tour will spring to life. Many regions and appellations have their own generic websites.

And for when you do fall in love with a wine or three – and you will – consider taking a special wine suitcase to bring your booty home, or arrange to have it shipped.

We've put together four separate itineraries that assume an arrival early Thursday evening and departure on Sunday. Fall in love with the region and its wines, and you'll have to plan a longer visit, with a new list of wineries to discover...

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FRIDAY

Morning

Eric Narioo, co-founder of UK-based merchant Les Caves de Pyrene, makes personality-filled wines at **Vino di Anna** with his Australian wife Anna Martens. You can visit their winery in Solicchiata by appointment (email is best), an arrangement you will have to get used to on Etna, where you can expect to pay from about £25 per person. The big names in wine here include Marco de Grazia and his **Tenuta delle Terre Nere**, Passopisciaro's **Andrea Franchetti** and silver-haired Belgian ex-pat **Frank Cornelissen**, whose controversial views and wines divide critics and consumers alike.

Lunch

Try one of Narioo's favourite local restaurants, Terra Mia (+39 393 906 9704), in the country near Solicchiata, where you can feast on pasta with wild fennel pesto, roast black Nebrodi pork and local ricotta with chopped almonds, pistachios and chestnut honey.

Afternoon

Drive to Randazzo along Etna's newly tarmacked roads (thanks to the volcano's frequent belching), past vineyards planted on the mountainside on steep terraces, set among oak and chestnut forests, hazelnuts and apple trees. Built almost entirely of lava stone, Randazzo is the closest town to the volcano's summit, but it has never been fully engulfed. Stroll the dark medieval streets before stopping for an early evening snifter.

Evening

Enjoy an aperitif at **Il Buongustaio**, nibbling on local cheeses and meats before moving on to dinner at gem of a family-run trattoria **San Giorgio e Il Drago**, feasting on grandma's handmade tonnacchioli (pasta) with wild mountain greens and rabbit cooked with tomatoes, olives and capers.

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